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AUTHOR Bleuer, Jeanne C.; Walz, Garry R.

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ABSTRACT

Too often parents, teachers, and even counselors assume that underachievers are students who can, but simply don't (or won't) achieve. But student underachievement is a complex problem that defies a "one size fits all" solution. Although past research has extensively explored and documented the links between personal and social variables and levels of achievement, there is a strong need for research that tests and validates comprehensive models of interventions that attempt to address the underachievement problem. This digest highlights the relevance of student underachievement to current national priorities, discusses the role of the school counselor, and reviews current research on counseling underachievers as well as basic concepts of the updated "Counseling Underachievers" model. (Contains 15 references.) (GCP)

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Jeanne C. Bleuer
Garry R. Walz

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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New Perspectives on Counseling Underachievers

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Too often parents, teachers, and even counselors, assume that underachievers are students who can, but simply don't (or won't) achieve. Mandel and Marcus (1995, p. 4) identified six types of underachievers: 1) *Coasters*, those who are the ultimate procrastinators - easy-going and unmotivated; 2) *Anxious Underachievers*, those who want to do better but are too tense and uptight to work effectively; 3) *Identity-Searchers*, those who are so wrapped up in figuring out who they are that they become distracted from schoolwork; 4) *Wheeler-Dealers*, those who are impulsive, manipulative, and so intent on instant gratification that they see no point in doing well in school; 5) *Sad Underachievers*, those who lack the energy needed for schoolwork because of their depression and low self-esteem; and 6) *Defiant Underachievers*, those who underachieve as an act of rebellion. Of these, only the "coasters" and the "defiant underachievers" clearly fit the stereotype. The priorities of the "identity-searchers" and "wheeler dealers" make it difficult for them to focus on achievement; and the situation of the "anxious underachievers" and the "sad underachievers" could almost be described as, "They can, but they can't."

Relevance of Student Underachievement to Current National Priorities

The *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2001, which President George W. Bush signed into law on January 8, 2002, clearly demonstrates a strong national commitment to improving the academic success of *all* children (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Although the specific term "underachievement" may not be used in the NCLB, the law is clearly aimed at all students who don't succeed, whether it is because they can't or because they won't.

The U.S. Department of Education's increasing emphasis on scientifically based evidence and the establishment of the *What Works* Clearinghouse (w-w-c.org/public/index.html) represent a second priority that has significant implications for providing assistance to underachievers. While there are abundant documents in the education literature that examine the relationships among achievement variables, the *What Works* Clearinghouse's mission of collecting and disseminating scientifically-based outcome research should help to encourage researchers to shift their emphasis from looking at *causes* of underachievement to looking at *solutions* that can enable all students to achieve.

The Role of the School Counselor

Nearly all underachievers, at one time or another, are referred to the school counselor either by a teacher or the student's parents, with the high expectation that the counselor can magically "cure" the student's lack of achievement motivation. However, even though the task may seem impossible and the expectations unrealistic, school counselors are well qualified professionals in an advantageous position to help underachievers improve their performance.

In recent years, increasing demands for school counselors to help students and staff deal with crises such as violence, bullying, drugs, and suicide have seemed to pull counselors away from a focus on less urgent matters such as working with underachievers. However, as Hanson (2002, p. 167) points out, "Academic support has long been accepted as a major, if not primary, role of school counselors." Evidence that school counselors are returning to this position is provided in the draft of the American School Counselor Association's *National Model for School Counseling Programs* in which the authors state, "Today, in a world enriched by diversity and technology, school counselors' chief mission is still supporting the academic achievement of all students so they are prepared for the ever-changing world of the 21st century (Bowers & Hatch, 2002, p. 7).

Current Research on Counseling Underachievers

A search of the ERIC database for the ten-year period from 1992 through 2001 yielded only twenty items that were indexed using the descriptors, UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND (COUNSELORS OR COUNSELING). Limiting the search to major descriptors reduced the number to seven. Of these, only two were research/technical reports, with one focusing on gifted underachievers and the other on the role of the school psychologist.

A similar lack of research-based, counseling-relevant resources for working with underachievers in the mid-80's prompted the director and associate director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services to conduct a thorough review of the research on achievement motivation. The purpose of the review was to identify factors that affected students' desire and ability to achieve so that appropriate counseling interventions could be developed. This led to the development of a comprehensive model for counselor intervention and the publication of the first edition of *Counseling Underachievers* (Bleuer, 1987).

The original *Counseling Underachievers* model (Bleuer, 1987, p. 31) incorporated elements of expectancy-value (Atkinson, 1964); self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977); learned helplessness (Dweck, 1975); internal-external locus of control (Rotter, 1966); perceived personal control (Stipek & Weisz, 1981); and attribution theory (Weiner, 1979). Reports of recent studies (e.g., Stipek, 2001; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002) validate their continuing relevance. These studies also provide a more in-depth understanding of how the constructs work and identify new factors such as the importance of goal setting (Schunk, 2001) and psychological resilience (Benard, 1995) in promoting academic achievement.

Based on these new insights, Bleuer and Walz have updated the model and are preparing a new edition of Counseling *Underachievers* (to be available in December, 2003).

Basic Concepts of the Updated Counseling Underachievers Model

While it is beyond the scope of this Digest to provide a full description and diagram of the complex relationships among the achievement variables that have been incorporated into the updated *Counseling Underachievers* model, the following discussion highlights the major components.

The model begins with "input" variables which are organized into three sets: 1) *external variables* (family/community, peers, school, teachers, teaching methods, task difficulty); 2) *cognitive variables* (mental ability/aptitudes, prerequisite knowledge, past learning experiences, study skills, learning style); and 3) *affective variables* (mood or disposition, psychological development, values/goals, risk-taking propensity, resilience). These variables interact with one another to lead the student to a preliminary level of *life/career goals and aspirations*.

The input variables and the student's life/career aspirations continue to interact with one another to lead the student to a *perception of his/her academic ability* (the "I *can* achieve" stage) and a *desire to achieve* (the "I *want* to achieve" stage). Next the student must proceed through a *commitment* stage (I *will* achieve), followed by an actual expenditure of

effort. Theoretically, the effort will result in *learning* and a mark or *grade* commensurate with the effort put forth. Of course, the level of learning will be modified by his/her cognitive abilities, and the actual grade earned will be dependent on the grading practices of the school or teacher (e.g., mastery vs. normative).

In most achievement models, increased learning and improved grades are seen as the ultimate desired outcomes. However, in the *Counseling Underachievers* model, they are seen as enabling goals which lead to *empowerment* and *strengthened resilience*. Although it is not illustrated in the chart above, empowerment and strengthened resilience are also seen as both ultimate and enabling goals by feeding back into the input variables through increased academic ability, changed family/peer expectations, improved self concept, etc. This feedback loop demonstrates how the achievement process can recycle itself to lead to continued, or even greater, achievement in the future.

Suggested Strategy for Using the *Counseling Underachievers* Model

As part of the school counselor's efforts to implement a developmental guidance approach that addresses the needs of all students, he/she should review each student's academic progress on a regular basis. To follow up with students for whom underachievement is identified as a significant problem, the following strategy is suggested.

1) Through a combination of individual, group, and/or family counseling as well as consultation with teachers, explore the extent to which each input variable presented in the *Counseling Underachievers* model is an asset or a barrier to the student's academic achievement.
2) Make a written list of the variables and, in collaboration with the student, rate each one on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being a barrier and 5 being an asset.
3) Again in collaboration with the student, for each "1" brainstorm ways that the barrier might be addressed and for each "5" brainstorm ways that the student might capitalize on his/her asset.
4) Focusing on one barrier and one asset at a time, prepare a written action plan including specific activities which the student will undertake, a timeline for their completion, and a follow-up session with the counselor to review progress.
5) Continue focusing on other barriers and assets with appropriate rewards given at mutually agreed upon levels of success.

Summary

Student underachievement is a complex problem that defies a "one size fits all" solution. Although past research has extensively explored the and documented links between personal and social variables and levels of achievement, there is a strong need for research that tests and validates *comprehensive* models of interventions that attempt to address the underachievement problem. Until such scientifically based evidence is produced, however, counselors, teachers, and parents can take steps to help underachievers overcome their barriers to achievement by implementing the strategies presented here and in the many resources currently available in online and/or print format.

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